You can die but once? Creativity, narrative and epistemology in Western death

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ABSTRACT

Employing two case studies from different spheres of anthropological practice, we argue that a narrative approach provides productive analytical ground for the study of Western death. It has been argued that narratives are attempts to create a presence to what is absent and truth to what is imagined and forgotten. Inverting this thesis, in this paper, we investigate how narratives can create absence where there is presence and ignite imagination and speculation where there is truth. Arguing that death 'invites a story', we examine cases which are as much about creative orchestration of human ingenuity as of meaningful accounts of epistemological meta-language.

KEYWORDS: death; epistemology; narrative; forensics; sorcery; bio-social

Introduction

She was no more than ten years old. Lying in a shallow grave, her tiny hands bound and with injuries to her head, it seemed she had met a most violent end. (Daily Mail, 2010, September 16)

I am convinced that he was the innocent victim of a sorcerer. We do not have records of insanity in my family.(Dorothea, 2011, December 27)

What is the link between the death of a child whose body was found after almost two millennia at an archaeological site in northern England, and a young man in his mid-twenties who committed suicide in the early 1900s in a town in central Greece?

What possible connection could there be between these two disparate individuals separated by space, time and culture, other than the fact that the stories regarding their circumstances of death have ignited public imagination and speculation?

We were confronted by these questions when deciding to co-author a paper on rhetorics of death. Coming from two strands of anthropology – biological and sociocultural – what could a discussion of two separate case studies bring to the epistemology of death? Are the two fields completely unrelated or is there more in common than initially thought? When participating in a series of bio-social debates at Durham University, we realised that death, more than any other aspect of the human life story, has the ability to transcend boundaries of science and culture and allow for comparative methodological and theoretical analysis. Death is often considered the only certainty in life, yet in both biological and sociocultural anthropology this 'fact' is regularly challenged through rhetoric and narrative.

Especially when unanticipated, death tests the 'nature and limits of cultural resource, calls up inventive answers, and, in so doing, demonstrates the very nature of both culture and human imagination' (Carrithers, 2010, p. 1). The stories we narrate in this paper concern human ingenuity, manipulation, aggression and violence. They are about individuals who have captured the collective imagination with the circumstances of their death and ignited public speculation on a number of levels. Furthermore, we investigate the way these stories have – to their own merit – been treated by two different publics, narrativised and ultimately historicised, in order to argue that an interdisciplinary approach to death studies could be epistemologically productive.

In this paper, we promote a narrative approach to death. Buck starts her analysis based on empirical forensic data which trigger different interpretations and ultimately lead to diverse stories. Pipyrou focuses on stories which although not homogenous in their interpretation, through the passage of time produce 'hard data-like' effects. Not taking lightly the dangers inherent in such approaches, interdisciplinary as well as multi-sited research promoted dialogue between the disciplines and stretched our understanding regarding the manifestations of death within the Western World (Hockey, Komaromy, & Woodthorpe, 2010). The narratives surrounding the deaths have been constructed by our interlocutors in situ. Anthropologists based in British institutions, Buck has conducted research in Britain since 2003 and Pipyrou has conducted ethnographic research in Greece and Italy since 2003. We employ analytical tools derived from our respective fields whilst attempting to retain the original ethnographic integrity.

Both archaeological and anthropological narratives are attempts to create a presence to what is absent and truth to what is imagined and forgotten. Here we also claim the opposite; that narratives can create absence where there is presence and ignite imagination and speculation where there is truth. We aim to situate narratives of absence within everyday social relations (Bille, Hastrup, & Sørensen, 2010a).[1] As such, a lengthy discussion of philosophical perspectives on absence is beyond the scope of this essay; however, do we feel it necessary to briefly underline some key approaches to absence.

Absence can incorporate aspects of longing for what one does not possess, forming an absolute constitutive of social relations (Kierkegaard, 1988). In a similar vein, Arthur Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer, 1966) argues that absence is an integral part of suffering as actors strive to fulfil their unrelenting desires. An alternative philosophical perspective is offered by Patrick Fuery (Fuery, 1995) who suggests that absence exists in two registers 'primary absence' and 'secondary absence' – the former relates to 'absence-in-itself', outside of presence, and the later defined according to 'its relational connection to presence'. Meanwhile, Jean-Paul Satre (Satre, 2005) suggests that directing attention towards absence makes present people and things disappear (Bille, Hastrup, & Sørensen, 2010b, p. 5). Our endeavour in this paper is to locate absence 'in story' and demonstrate how scientific data and rhetorical narrative are entwined in the 'production' of death – suffering and the desire to create a socially acceptable death can transform death stories.

Our argument here is not ontological in a strong sense. We are interested in the fashion of thinking, imagining and talking about death but we do not suggest that these are the only ways of 'knowing'. Dead subjects in the narrations are reenacted, re-created and in the end re-claimed as they are 'pulled' by the narrative forces in different and perhaps opposing directions – that of pastness and futureness, objectivism and subjectivism. We see this pulling as prosthesis; it does not only multiply the dead person but it changes its nature. The narrative becomes a trace of an absence, an image of a person that has disappeared or has never existed apart from in narrative form (cf. Bille et al., 2010b; Vernant, 1986, pp. 58–59). It is also prosthesis in epistemological grounds; a narrative approach to death studies can proliferate in encompassing subjective and objective methods of analysis. Arnar A ´ rnason (A´ rnason, 2012, p. 66) has suggested that the experience of the 'presence of the dead' by the living merits anthropological attention. Here we want to stretch this argument further by focusing on the manner that the presence of, and a discussion about, the deceased is 'accommodated' within epistemological fields (Silverman&Klass, 1996).

Ernest Becker (Becker, 1973, pp. ix–x) has argued that the study of death should combine 'several disciplines of the human sciences' to make sense of the 'mountains of facts' and 'truths'. A methodological approach that incorporates narratives and rhetoric adds an extra aspect to the 'facts' of death. This facilitates a deeper understanding of how death is experienced by the living and how death can be transformed according to significant aspects of history and culture. In both biological and sociocultural analysis, the story of death is reconstructed by academics and publics alike (cf. Herzfeld, 1993).

Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, the death stories of a child in Roman Britain and a young man in twentieth-century Greece exhibit remarkable similarities. Both are concerned with transforming the circumstances of death through persuasive rhetoric. As might be expected, however, given the different historical and cultural contexts in which they exist, the death stories also reveal salient differences. They draw on very different conceptions of the

individual and society, are embedded in alternative sets of social stigma and acceptability, and adopt very different attitudes towards science and myth (cf. Argyrou, 1993, p. 258). Nevertheless, we believe that narrative analysis can provide significant methodological and theoretical contributions to the interdisciplinary study of death and begin to bridge these spatiotemporal chasms.

By examining two accounts of death that are paradoxically so similar yet so different, we aim to generate critical methodological and analytical questions (Danforth, 1989, p. 7). The two accounts are worthy of anthropological attention in their own right, but when considered together they provide fruitful insights into interdisciplinarity and cross-cultural analysis that can only be provided through the study of death.

Loring Danforth (Danforth, 1989, pp. 7–8) has argued that ethnographic accounts that make use of comparative analysis frequently present a series of incongruous images that have the positive jarring effect of making the worlds of cultural others appear more familiar. By 'moving back and forth between narrative voices' (Danforth, 1989, p. 8), this paper facilitates comparisons between biological and sociocultural approaches to death, employing narrative and rhetoric to further unpack particular social and 'scientific' circumstances.

The subject of death is potentially one of the primary areas that sociocultural and biological, and in particular forensic anthropology, can come together because of the social construction of the corpse in the Western World (Foltyn, 2008). Much of the work of the forensic anthropologist is the empirical measurement of the dead body, the workplace of the sociocultural anthropologist is living and embodied beings. Death is constructed within the realm of social beings as the living body is the locus for the intertwining of space and an unfolding of meaning (see Herzfeld, 1993). As the dead can no longer speak for themselves, they invite multi-textual stories constituted in the realms of both science and society. We argue that the narrative of death is a meeting place for the disparate arms of sociocultural and biological anthropology for it is a space that can be filled by multiple stories that do not necessarily contradict one another. Forensic science can give a form of meaning and identity, but a narrative approach to death can produce alternate identities that can complement and extend scientific analysis.

Similar to the actors that appear in the paper, we as authors are 'invited' by death to make a comment, thus resulting in our central claim; that death invites a discussion, an epistemological meta-commentary on what we say, think and imagine in quotidian and academic environments. It will become evident that 'hard' data cannot escape rhetoric and stories as well as rhetoric are not void of truth and 'hard data-like' evidence. As our methodologies are different, the narrative approach will provide a common analytical ground from which to draw our conclusions.

A story about two stories

Yannis Hamilakis (Hamilakis, 2002, p. 121) has argued that the Minoans of Bronze Age Crete, occupy 'an eminent position in the public imagination, where mythological elements are mixed with archaeological information and architectural and artistic representations, many of them created at the beginning of this century'. In this sense, the Minoans are 'in story' as much as a product of data and information as of imagination and literary production making these stories at once the heterotopic assemblage of sedimentation of archaeological information, current public interpretation and generational infiltration. This paper is about the deaths of two unknown people, a child and a young man named Giannis, who are themselves caught 'in story' and their trajectories are a product of narratives targeting both the dead and the living.

Death is a multiply constructed and intersubjective emotional experience through which social and scientific configurations are exposed and expressed (Danforth, 1982; Davies & Park, 2012). It is a communicative instance where cultural ideas and identity idioms are re-negotiated in relation to the actors' struggle to establish and finalise personal and collective understanding. In the first case of the murdered child, death is a context, an idiom and an occasion for contemporary British society to bring together the missing parts of a historical puzzle. In the second case, Giannis's suicide, the death event was given an alternate interpretation, one that has filtered through four generations to the present day, providing coherence and continuity to his family and a 'good' and justified death to Giannis.

Our analytic endeavour will remain with the narrative accounts as proposed by the British public, scientists and Giannis's family. Our focus on narrative is not casual. As Ian Hodder argues:

> a narrative account is needed because the macro-processed do not fully account for what is being observed at the small scale … This emphasis on narrative is also important because of the public interest in the human scale of the past … It demonstrates the public need to sense a human scale in the vast expenses of archaeological time. The narrative windows which we construct around individual events and lives create a point of entry into the long term for the non-specialist. (2000, p. 31)

The trope of the window points to a kind of opening and entry. It allows imagination to reconfigure data, individual and collective dispositions and time, mould them and then 'see' them and recognise a new story (Zografou & Pipyrou, 2011, p. 433). It also allows for time travel. A window may be a point of entry in time and once open can lead to another point in time (cf. Knight, 2012a; Stewart, 2012). These narrative windows allow the self to be at once retroactive and proactive.

Whilst discussing comparative phenomena that transcend the fields of biological and sociocultural anthropology, it became apparent that through narrative our interlocutors condense moments of the past into meaningful commentaries on present social conditions (Knight, 2012a, 2012b, p. 55) and transform accounts of death to serve particular personal and collective purposes. Stephen Crites suggests that narratives are cultural interpretations of temporality (Crites, 2001, p. xxi; also Gilsenan, 1996; Knight, 2012b; Sutton, 2001), while for Lance Bennett, memory and narrative are connected to each other through the operation of the latter as interpretive device. Through storytelling, the elements of narrative such as the scene, act and agency are deliberately transformed in order to convey and propose different interpretations, loaded with different messages (Bennett, 2001, p. xxi). 'Individuals', Anthony Cohen and Nigel Rapport argue, 'own – and perhaps come to be owned by – unique narratives which unfold and mutate as these individuals situate themselves within moral, social, cultural and historical habitats' (1995, p. 7; Rapport, 1993, p. 78ff). If subjects are constituted in narrative in an intersubjective fashion then emphasising agency in interpreting past bodies and stories is vital (Fowler, 2002, p. 48). As both cases are examples of the conflicting nature of the structure/agency relationship, our explanatory endeavour complies with a narrative rhetoric which bends the constraints of structure (Carrithers, 2010, p. 6) and privileges the unexpected cracks and crevices in time that allow shared dispositions between the dead and the living.

According to Nadia Seremetakis (Seremetakis, 1991), death is not a bounded event, but one that contains all aspects of culture. The end of our protagonists was violent; both murder and suicide capture the imagination of Western cultures as particularly disturbing and violent fashions to end one's life. Violence can be managed through sound and language (Seremetakis, 1991, p. 118). In Maniant funeral lamentations 'language and sound intensify and deintensify the presence of violence and defilement of any social situation … The acoustic power of the lament, like its language, faces opposite directions: towards the dead and towards the living' (ibid.). This intervention is polysemic. It does not draw care away from the dead towards the living, but situates the dead and the living mourner in the same ethical space. Drawing on the idea of antiphony (responsive singing) Seremetakis argues for a sharing of time and space between living and dead through lamentation. The narratives that are presented in this paper are proposed as metaphorical lamentations, explanations that intensify and draw attention to violence, diversions and finally as 'truth claims' intended for both the living (who are constantly re-constructing the story(ies) about the dead) and the dead (who constantly haunt and feed the imagination of the living).

Truth claim one – identity of the child

In a society preoccupied with youth and beauty such as contemporary Britain, any story about the gruesome murder of a young, pretty victim is a national obsession (Foltyn, 2008). In the situation described in the introductory byline, the young child portrayed in such

emotive language is actually that of an ancient skeleton of whose identity only certain facts can be known. The dead body provides an intriguing and important source of discourse for scholars, the mass media and the general public. In the rhetoric surrounding the story of the skeleton, as reported in the media, the focus was on the violent death, the young age and the sex of the child.

The skeleton of the child was discovered in the summer of 2010, buried beneath the floor of a soldiers' barrack building at Vindolanda, a Roman fort near Hadrian's Wall in northern England. The find dated to around 220 AD, a time when the fort had been occupied by a cohort of auxiliary soldiers from Gaul. Having been initially thought by excavators to be the remains of a large dog or monkey, the skeleton was subsequently identified as human, a child of approximately 10 years old. The location of the find was unusual and unexpected as the laws of the Roman Empire did not allow human burial within the confines of living space; to do so was to go against social and religious beliefs. The body, squeezed into a small space in the corner of the room, hidden beneath the floor, suggested a deviant and most probably clandestine burial.

The skeleton was found laid on its left side in a semi-crouched position, with both arms placed together in front of the upper body. Soil conditions had left the postcranial skeleton relatively well preserved, with most elements of the body present including the smallest of finger bones and the unfused epiphyses of the long bones. The remains of the skull, however, were less well preserved. Fragmented parts of the mandible, maxilla, temporal, parietal and occipital bones were present but large parts of the face and cranial vault were lost. It was this fact that had led to the initial confusion over the identification of the species of the skeleton. Enough dental evidence remained to enable an assessment of chronological age of the individual, with a preliminary estimate of around 8–10 years being determined. No grave goods or evidence of clothing or personal possessions were found with the skeleton. The location of the burial in a non-sanctioned area and the fragmented nature of the cranium in comparison with the preservation of the rest of the body led to the suggestion that the child had been murdered and disposed of in a covert fashion.

Human skeletal remains have a multifaceted nature, being at the same time a natural and a cultural entity that can become the focus of reflection on both life and death. As a natural phenomenon the skeleton is a dry, inanimate object, the final remains of a lived body. Joanna Sofaer (Sofaer, 2006) has suggested that skeletal remains be treated as material culture that can be used as a source of archaeological investigation and subjugated to the same analytical process as any other artefact. Frank Saul, however, introduced the concept of reading the skeleton in the form of an osteobiography (Saul & Saul, 1989),a concept further elaborated upon by John Robb (Robb, 2002) who preferred the idea of an archaeology of human biography based on bodily experience that defines the normative and alternative life paths and links biographical narratives to identity, social action and

cosmology. As such, the dead body offers not only corporeal evidence of human existence, but the skeleton can also be seen as an artefact that has been created and shaped through the cultural experiences of life and death. In the case of the child, it is the death and after death experience that has been open to interpretation.

Since the discovery, the body of the child has been the subject of polyvalent interpretation by both the team that investigated the burial and the British mass media and public. The general consensus is that having been given a deviant and clandestine burial the child was violently taken out of the cultural process of death in Roman society and specific aspects of identity were irrevocably removed. The final acts of the child's story were missing, thus creating a knowledge vacuum that could be filled by speculation and individual interpretations. As a result, the identity of the child was transformed and re-created depending on various speculators who fed different narratives.

It is an archaeological commonplace that the living bury the dead (Tarlow, 2011); this particular aphorism is used to explain how the interests of the living, especially in terms of promoting specific social ideologies and power relations, are served by particular mortuary practices. It is, however, also the living that un-bury the dead and interpret the physical remains and mortuary practices in a new social context. Archaeologically, deviant burials and examples of clandestine internments are rare, in particular those of apparent murders (Fitzpatrick & Laidlaw, 2001).

The burial of the child took place outside the norms of society, thus denying the final aspect of identity in Roman society. Around 220 AD Roman burial practice dictated care for the integrity of the corpse and provided a safe containment for both the dead and the living. Concern for the future wellbeing of the body was important, especially on the immediate post-mortem journey. In a normal burial situation, food, drink, lamps, money for the fare and boots for the long walk would be provided. No such material was found with the body of the child. Respect for the dead was shown by ensuring that all burials were kept outside of urban areas. Cremation burials were common but where inhumations were used, secure coffins were employed to ensure the peace of the dead and a hygienic environment for the living (Taylor, 2010). Commemorating the dead was common, with grave markers providing the name and social status of the individual and thereby ensuring their continued presence, albeit in a different way, within Roman society. By burying the child clandestinely, the perpetrators of the act were taking him or her out of that society, removing the chance of their continued identity in the Roman world. The erasure of this identity allowed for the creation of a new identity, open to a flexible interpretation and rhetorical narrative, within our contemporary world.

The dead body can be read as a series of signs that have the ability to provide tangible evidence of otherwise invisible processes and events (Crossland, 2009).[2] The body as

evidence can be manifested at different levels depending on the actor doing the 'reading'. On a scientific level the body, as examined by a forensic anthropologist, provides the evidence of the biological identity of the deceased individual. Biological identity focuses on the determination of the sex, seen here as a simple dichotomy of male or female, the age at death, their stature and the geographic ancestry of the individual. The role of the forensic anthropologist is to provide an individuation, to give as much information as possible that can help determine the social identity of an individual. The scientific factors such as age and sex are used to narrow down searches for missing persons, or to match a lost individual with a found body. A series of methods of differential accuracy are used to determine this 'hard' evidence. When first discovered and excavated the child was subjected to the norms of current archaeological practice; the bones were excavated, washed and photographed.

On first inspection the bones had been thought to belong to a dog or monkey, something that has precedent in Roman excavations. On subsequent analysis by a forensic anthropologist, the skeleton was identified as that of a human body and procedure required that the police were informed and a judicial process followed. As such a biological identity was created for the child. Signs of trauma and disease are also looked for and catalogued. In the case of the individual in question it was only possible to give an age at death due to the fragmented nature of the remains. As age was assessed at around 10 years, it was impossible to determine the biological sex of the child (Scheuer & Black, 2000). The features of the skeleton which define males and females, for example pelvic morphology, do not appear in the body until after puberty.

Highlighted by the intense media interest in the story of the child, the corpse falls under what Jacque Foltyn (Foltyn, 2008) has described as a 'source of fascination' for the living. Although no confirmation of the sex of the child was given and the facts surrounding the burial were tentative, a narrative arose in the form of a 'story seed' (Carrithers, 2007, p. 2) that centred on a female child as the young victim of a violent murder. Whilst the murder aspect of the burial was likely, given the circumstances of the burial and the differential preservation of the skeleton, the identification of the sex was inconclusive. However, the idea of a young girl bound and murdered, the body hidden away beneath the floor, fits with the picture of the perfect victim. A National Geographic television documentary was quickly commissioned soon after the story appeared in the newspapers. The tale of the child was to be told through forensic and narrative methods. Throughout the pre-production stage, the writer of the documentary was keen to discover the sex of the child and emphasis was placed on this as a major part of the story. Hope was refocused on the evidence from DNA, but again the vagaries of the archaeological record meant that no DNA was obtainable from the bones and the biological sex of the child was to remain a mystery.

In her discussion of the cult of celebrity death Foltyn (2008) clearly highlights the media phenomenon in her narratives of the death stories of Princess Diana and the actress Anna

Nicole Smith, the latter over whose state of bodily decomposition there was much online debate (Foltyn, 2008). Both women died early and violent deaths, and both deaths invited a story. Dr Frederic Maillez, the off-duty French physician who ministered to the dying Diana before the official medical team arrived, provided a more comforting image of the dying princess.

Such publicly given stories maintain the narrative of the glamourous and beautiful and detour the mind from the violent death. Violent death invites the story as a way of enabling the actors to recreate an identity and a new truth that provides either greater comfort or encourages fantasy for the living. There is an oscillation of identity, from 'scientifically' proven to publicly constructed, be it the family of the deceased or the wider public audience who view the body of the child skeleton in a museum. Identities are not static, but constructed through interactions with people, and this is the space where sociocultural and biological anthropology can meet.

Truth claim two – a touch of death

The second story is about a young man who committed suicide in rural central Greece at the dawn of the twentieth century. The small village in which the suicide occurred is located in an agro-pastoral area of the prefecture of Thessaly. The story was passed down through generations in narrative form. Dorothea, the most recent person to narrate the account,[3] is the great-great niece of a working class young man who committed suicide in his mid-twenties. Dorothea heard this story from her mother whose grandmother, Sofia, was Giannis's sister.

Giannis's immediate family consisted of six members, the two parents and four siblings, three of whom were girls. They were working class people with small plots of land to cultivate for self-sufficiency, their livelihood supported by the father's and son's craft as builders. They had a very good social reputation in the village and the females of the family were highly praised for their capacity for hard work in the fields and with family livestock. Giannis, being the only son of the family, was adored by his sisters.

During his time as a contractor in a nearby town, Giannis fell in love with a girl whom he planned to marry. Yet, his plans did not come to fruition after the stern intervention of his mother who believed that a local girl would be much more suitable for him. Indeed, after a while a local family exhibited interest in having their daughter, Koula, married to Giannis. The night that the two families met to 'seal the deal' in Koula's house something happened that, according to Giannis's family, changed the trajectory of his life. In Greek traditional settings, it was customary that the future bride 'treat' (na kerasei) the potential groom.

This was considered a suitable occasion to exhibit her skills as a good host, but also any apparent physical defects would be visible to the potential groom.

That night Koula appeared gracefully holding a plate with small pieces of meat and approached Giannis. She twisted the plate so he would pick the piece that appeared suspiciously separate.[4] Giannis later told his mother about that evening: 'I was very reluctant to go to her house. I had a dreadful feeling. I did not even want to accept her treat, but Koula came to me first and I felt uncomfortable to refuse the offer'.

Thereafter Giannis started visiting Koula occasionally, always with the presence of Koula's mother, and he gradually started reciprocating Koula's feelings. Yet, after a short period, Koula's family called-off the engagement.[5] They claimed they had found another man who was wealthier and owned a lot of livestock. The new man's social and economic status, as they insisted, was more comparable to their own. The cancellation of the engagement hurt Giannis deeply. He was embarrassed to the point that he wouldn't go out of his house because 'he lost face' and because his reputation was severely damaged (Campbell, 1964; Herzfeld, 1985). He had also the bizarre fear that Koula's relatives wanted to harm him and started demonstrating quite unusual behaviour. He became quiet and distant, was depressed and began exhibiting suicidal tendencies.

His first attempt to commit suicide was unsuccessful. He hung himself in the basement of his home, but his mother and older sister found him and saved him at the last minute. After that incident the family started watching over Giannis intensely. Giannis however seemed determined to put an end to his life. He managed to escape supervision and found himself alone in the sheep-pen, where he consumed a quantity of fertiliser. When the family found him he was writhing in agony and pleading for somebody to cut him loose, to release him from his agony. He died shortly after. His last words to his mother were: 'I only took a small amount, only a small amount'.

After his death, Giannis's family directly accused Koula of having practised sorcery on him, basing their accusation on the fact that Giannis was not attracted to Koula in the beginning. They were convinced that the night of the engagement Koula made Giannis 'eat her spells'(na faei ta ma΄yia) through the treat he was offered in the house. Koula's move to treat Giannis first as an honorary guest acquired a suspicious status, as did the separation of the portion of food destined for him. According to Giannis's mother, her son had sensed the forthcoming danger and that is why he appeared reluctant to go to Koula's home. To the present day, Giannis's sisters' great-great nephews and nieces insist that their great-great uncle was the innocent victim of Koula's sorcery. Dorothea also argues that her great-great uncle was the innocent victim of Koula's sorcery and her claim is based on the absence of any known cases of insanity in her family.

Dorothea, 23, is studying at university to become a medical doctor. In general terms her interpretation of the story follows the line constructed by the family. Yet, she seems more preoccupied with the issue of insanity rather than suicide, a term she deliberately avoids. Her intellectual engagement with medicine prompts her to examine Giannis's death from a different perspective. She has extensively searched her genealogical tree which connects her with Giannis for information regarding the mental status of her relatives. The absence of similar instances or any other sort of depression reassures her that her great-great uncle was the innocent victim of Koula's sorcery.

In Greece, suicide is considered a social taboo which dramatically stigmatises not only the deceased but also their family (Knight, 2012b, p. 59). The social stigma of 'insanity', presumed as the prime and foremost reason for committing suicide, is attached to the actor's family, since 'blood' relations and heredity constitute the most readily available explanations for such cases in the Greek context (du Boulay, 1974, p. 142; Just, 2000, pp. 101–102).

Insanity is believed to be transmitted through the substance of blood, thus Giannis's suicide would be a tremendous blow to the family's reputation for generations (cf. Argyrou, 1993). Crucially, there were three daughters of marriage age whose prospects of having a good marriage would be severely curtailed had any connection been made with insanity. In this case, a new (di) version was created and the internal structure of the discourse was manipulated towards a different claim to truth. The story had to be transformed in order for the family to avoid the social stigma and to provide the deceased with a 'good memory' and therefore a 'good' death (Bloch & Parry, 1982; Hart, Sainsbury, & Short, 1998; Hertz, 1960; Panourgia, 1995, p. 70; Seremetakis, 1991, p. 79). In the new story, the scene, act and agency would be deliberately transformed in order to establish a different interpretation, loaded with a different message (Bennett, 2001, p. 75; Ku, 1999). The message had to promote a new identity for the deceased, 'fabricated by techniques of distraction' (Seremetakis, 1994, p. 13), and not the least bit associated with suicide.

The construction of death narratives in Greece is intimately linked to notions of honour and shame and to idioms of 'good' and 'bad' death. Greece has been analysed in terms of the values of honour and shame since John Campbell (Campbell, 1964) attempted to explain Greek society on the basis of institutionalised marriage and kinship (cf. Goddard, 1994; Loizos & Papataxiarchis, 1991). According to the code of honour and shame, the position of a family and its individuals in the social world depends on reputation (Cowan, 1990, p. 9; Dubisch, 1995, p. 196; Peristiany, 1965). The values of honour and shame place the institution of kinship at the centre of anthropological enquiry (cf. Goddard, 1994, p. 68; Just, 2000, p. 5) and 'unite ideas about power, sexuality, and gender relationships with a rigid spatial and behavioural division between women and men' (Dubisch, 1995, p. 196). The reputation of men is defended primarily in the public domain through the energetic

protection of the family's interests, as well as of the chastity of their wives, sisters, mothers and daughters (Campbell, 1964, p. 146; Dubisch, 1995, p. 196; Kirtsoglou, 2004, p. 20). The reputation of women is believed to be related to the cultivation of shame; on their repute for being virtuous.

Notions of honour and shame extend to accounts of death. As suicide is still considered a taboo issue that can stain a family's honour, cases are allocated alterative narratives (Knight, 2012b,p. 59; Pipyrou, 2014). Shame brought upon family reputation through suicide can stigmatise an entire family for generations and invokes connotations of contamination. The construction of an alternative death narrative is at once a gift to defend the honour of the dead person, and a gift to the family who would otherwise have to endure the social humiliation of suicide. A 'bad' death is thus transformed into a 'good' death as Giannis's family rewrite his death through intergenerational narrative (cf. Tonkin, 1992).[6]

Giannis's family were 'actively engaged in reshaping their lives' by 'employing a strategy aimed at the redefining problematic situations to their advantage' (Argyrou, 1993, p. 259, original emphasis). The honour of the family could be kept intact by employing explanations for sudden death that were socially acceptable, highlighting the ubiquitous pressures of community in influencing the lives of its members (ibid., p. 262). In short, the outsiders' perception of the whole affair would be altered dramatically by transforming a case of suicide into a case of sorcery (ibid., pp. 265–266).

Interestingly, individual and collective reputation is also linked to the successful decomposition of the corpse after death. Danforth (1982, pp. 48–51) notes that when a corpse is exhumed, usually five or seven years after death, ideally only clean white bones should be present, offering 'visible evidence that the soul of the deceased has entered paradise' (1982, p. 49). However, on occasions that flesh, hair, and clothing are found in the grave, people begin to speculate as to the sins of the deceased and his/her family. A bad reputation can be confirmed by the poor condition of the remains (1982, p. 50).

Likely sources of blame include the lack of harmony in social relations between the deceased and the community, personal sins or suggestions that the deceased may be a victim of a malicious curse. The bones allow for the 'evaluation of the character and reputation of the deceased' and their family (1982, p. 51). According to Jean-Pierre Vernant (Vernant, 1986, p. 55), funerary practices and the construction of a 'beautiful death' are

> … means by which the living make the dead present, more present even, among the living, than are the living themselves. They constitute a social strategy which, in making the dead … continuously present to the group through the mechanisms of collective memory, attempts to domesticate death, to civilize it.

In the case of Giannis, this alternative narrative – in its various forms – became the official collective history of his family that transcended generations, creating continuity and coherence of his family world (Argenti & Schramm, 2010). The cultural beliefs concerning death, operated as a 'defence mechanism' at the subjective level and as 'deep motivations' at a cultural level (Stephen, 1999, p. 722). These cultural beliefs were manipulated through the selective inclusion and filtering of information in order to provide a final sociocultural (re)solution to a very untimely death, proving that the capacity for agency is rarely limited (Hodder, 2000; McNay, 2000, p. 5; Obeyesekere, 1990, pp. 288–289). On the one hand, Giannis was never able to write his story – not even through a dramatic final act – while on the other his family appear capable of re-writing the history of the deceased and the family as a whole despite, and perhaps against, the protagonist's wish. What the family managed to accomplish in Giannis's case was to de-emphasise his suicide by shifting the focus to the 'evil' woman, thus creating a 'social drama' (Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. 29) instead of a family one. After Giannis's death, the relationship between the two families was extremely hostile.

Until today, events that can be characterised as unusual are met with superstition in rural Thessaly, especially when constituting individual or collective danger (Carmel, 1996, p. 7; Herzfeld, 1981; Stewart, 1991). Different types of cultural behaviour oriented to the acquisition of socio-economic prestige are often deemed illegitimate (du Boulay & Williams, 1987, pp. 12–13). On rare occasions, social actors are even suspected of resorting to sorcery in order to win a man, become richer or harm a co-villager. Subversive counter-powers are perceived as forms of special power attributed to those people who are either less or more successful than others. Accordingly, in extreme cases, wealth or poverty can be explained in this context as a result of a provoked intervention of the supernatural (Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. xiii). Witchcraft and sorcery accusations[7] were very common in urban and rural Greece until the 1960s and the latter often led to conflict, violence and 'scapegoating' (du Boulay, 1974, p. 66; Stewart, 1991, p. 222; Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. ix). The image of the sorceress was related to malevolent women whose aim was to harm the family and its members, causing misfortune, even death, by casting spells upon them (Argyrou, 1993; du Boulay, 1974, pp. 66–68; cf. Giovannini, 1981, p. 419). The sorceress was believed to have a 'consuming force', thus 'eating' the power and life of the victims (Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. 2).

Adverse and unexpected deaths are likely to arouse ambivalent emotions and a search for explanation in terms of witchcraft and sorcery accusations. These accusations can operate as social catalysts that cause community fission and 'social dramas' (Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. 9). It has been argued that some narratives have a distinctly folk tale quality and they represent the myth that existed among the peasant populations of pre-industrial societies (Carmel, 1996, p. 24). According to Juliet du Boulay (du Boulay, 1974, p. 68), however, the social emergency which prompted people to 'extreme individualism' thus

leading them to sorcery accusations was the product of the ideological and historical context employed by the individuals in order to understand specific events of their world (see also Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. 30). It might be true that ideas which belong to the genre of witchcraft and sorcery seem to reappear pervasively in modern Europe as well as elsewhere around the world, acting as explanations for unfortunate, strange and inconceivable happenings in everyday life (Clark, 2001; Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. 5). Nevertheless, people do not simply abandon the ideas of the past but rather feed new ones into new circumstances (see Knight, 2012b; Stewart, 2012).

According to psychodynamic explanations, the individual may give vent to the inevitable hostilities arising in social interaction through witchcraft and sorcery accusations. Such accusations here are viewed as culturally sanctioned means of meeting the individual need as societies usually have mechanisms for the expression of hostility and the regulation of destructive results upon the Self (Stephen, 1999). Although such an explanation undoubtedly deserves merit, we put forward a claim that relates to individual agency, bringing the narratives of the dead child and Giannis into a culturally meaningful context of strategic manipulation of public, personal and family biographies.

Giannis's family transformed suicide into an indirect murder by accusing Koula's sorcery of being the cause of his death, proving that supernatural dimensions can also be seen as strategies for exercising the actors' agency over their own biographies and those of their loved ones. It is true that the anthropology of Greece lacks detailed ethnographic analysis on sorcery and witchcraft (Panourgia, 1995, p. 85), as well as suicide and Dorothea's argument above could be read as a classic Evans-Pritchardian (1937) position on rationality and causality. Greek subjects regularly discuss witchcraft and sorcery but they are not conceptually part of a societal block – such as Africa, Asia or the Americas – that has a history of stipulated practice and persecution (Panourgia, 1995, p. 85).

Whose evidence?

Forensic anthropology grounds its truth claims in the impartial collection of fact, and the practical knowledge and expertise of the researcher (Crossland, 2009). It could be then inferred that as a scientist, the forensic anthropologist should remain detached from the rhetorical excesses of the popular press and report only the empirical data obtainable from the skeleton. Within forensic anthropological practice the rhetorical trope of the 'body as evidence' has been explored in correlation with the complex sign relation that incorporates a range of interpretive possibilities (ibid.).

Popular accounts of forensic anthropology often talk of the 'testimony' or mute 'witness' of bones and describe human remains as 'speaking for themselves' in the service of justice and truth (e.g. Maples & Browning, 1994). The body provides unmediated access to past events

and reflects an empiricist faith in the ability of bodily facts to speak for themselves (Harper, 2010). Faith that bodily data can escape human mediation emanates from the theory that artefacts hold a primary agency and not secondary agency granted by the actors (Gell, 1998). Despite the fact that we acknowledge the merit of such a thesis, in the case of both the child and Giannis it is the living actors who engage creatively with the 'presence' of the deceased and thus invest in them in narrative form. Nevertheless, the dead body can be constructed as an active agent within a network of complex relations that incorporates archaeologists, various publics and living relatives (Árnason, 2012; Crossland, 2009).

Through bone examination Buck was commissioned to investigate the skeleton and determine the biological identity of the child. As it is not possible to sex the skeleton of a child who died before they had reached puberty, she privately named the child 'Georgie', a name that would be appropriate for both sexes. This casual naming took place in the field assisting communication between the archaeologists and volunteers on-site who were interested in the skeleton. Entering into dialogue with interested parties felt easier with a name. Buck acknowledges that

> to discuss the skeleton as a named individual rather than referring to 'it', something which seemed somewhat callous as the individual in question was a child that had suffered a violent end, was a subjective and not a strictly scientific approach.

This rather unproblematised sexing of the skeleton was the outcome of a need by the living to interact with the dead, to continuously change the narrative of the child. Take, for example, the presumed skull of the infamous Australian outlaw Ned Kelly which was removed after death and later his body disinterred (Crossland, 2009). Despite the disputed claims over the supposed skull of Kelly, the intense public and media interest in the remains illustrate the need for the public testimony of the body. The continuing bargaining over the authenticity of the skull shows how the body can move from being viewed as a person to that of property, in this case public property via media discussion, thus providing another form of scaling as suggested by Hodder (2000).

In re-creating his suicide as the result of sorcery, Giannis's family took ownership of his death and gradually the story – as well as 'Giannis in story' – became the property of his extended family. Over the course of four generations, the family and Giannis were owners and owned by the narrative (Cohen & Rapport, 1995). Similarly, on identification the child moved from an 'individual' to that of public property. Public narrative created a female sex, the perfect victim made flesh. Rhetoric overturned empirical methodology in creating his or her identity whilst in Giannis's case the rhetoric surrounding his death almost 100 years previous has produced 'hard data-like' effects.

The emphasis of the National Geographic documentary commissioned to portray the death of the child developed a dual aspect, whereby the story of the violent death was illustrated by two actors playing the role of the child, one male and one female. Although the premise was to give equal weighting to both children, viewers of the documentary commented on how the female actor appeared to be given greater attention as well as screen time than the male actor, unconsciously providing the child with an assumed, if not biological sex. This re-creation of the child as female was an echo of the original media reporting, where each newspaper presented the child as a girl. In a study of British newspaper front-page coverage, Mike Pickering, Jane Littlewood, and Tony Walter (Pickering, Littlewood, & Walter, 1997, p. 140) note that the presentation of 'bad deaths' is profoundly gendered, 'Exactly who dies and who kills, and who grieved and how, are gendered issues'. Within the time scale of their study, it was clear that in the stories given most prominent coverage gender was central to the construction of death related stories. The manner of the death of the child also became a focus of rhetorical discourse, moving from the empirical data to a representation of a 'bad' death with connotations of the 'perfect victim' that is prominent in contemporary tabloid reporting. It is no coincidence that the story of phone hacking amongst the British tabloid press became a national outcry only when it became known that the phone of the young and attractive murder victim Milly Dowler had been hacked. The event transformed from a celebrity story to one of national outrage that involved parliament and live media coverage. In the documentary about 'Georgie', five experts in fields related to the subject were asked to give their interpretation of the final hours of the child's life. Each individual created a different scenario.

It is a well-highlighted phenomenon that media interest is much greater in crimes that feature victims who have certain characteristics that incite public 'sympathy', be it gender, class, age or race (Uy, 2011). The child became 'the perfect victim', not because of what could be biologically determined through forensic science, but because of the collective narrative that we became aware of during discourse regarding the skeleton. Although it was not possible to determine the sex of the child, many people 'established' that the skeleton was of a girl, regardless of the data that were available. The circumstances of the death of the child, possibly bound, probably murdered and laid beneath the floor of a communal male barrack, suggested to the imagination of many, a sex crime. A dichotomy between what was 'known' and what was 'fact' was created, a separation of identity from identification. The changing status of the corpse in popular culture has been highlighted by Foltyn(2008), who discussed how the entertainment industry has shifted the boundaries between socially and sexually acceptable contact between the living and the dead. Forensic identification techniques are culturally bound. DNA has been described as 'a pop cultural icon' in terms of forensic science (Foltyn, 2008), but whilst promising a scientifically constructed truth, DNA should still be considered within our own cultural perceptions of the body. Scientists do not operate in a social vacuum; rather their work is constructed within the framework of their own understanding (Gowland & Thompson, 2013). The final identity

of the child, in terms of the external narration, hung on the testimony of the DNA. The testimony failed, no DNA could be obtained and the 'truth claim' continued to belong to the public imagination.

Just give me the facts

In the course of the last eight years Pipyrou interviewed many of Giannis's relatives, each one producing a slightly different scenario emphasising different aspects of the story. Occupational status and education seem to influence shifts in the narrative of Giannis's emotional and psychological condition and cause of death (cf. Argyrou, 1993). Despite their differences, these scenarios revolve and evolve around two parameters: murder and sorcery. For example, his late sister Sofia argued that her brother's emotional state was always stable; 'he was always singing whilst working and never gave us the least of worries. All this started with the evil woman'. The same opinion was shared by his two other sisters, none of whom utter the terms 'suicide' or 'insanity': 'Koula cast her spells on him and this killed him'(*H koula tou ekane ma΄yia ki auto ton skotose*).

Sofia's late husband admitted that Giannis took the poison but again conceded that 'it all happened too quickly, we did not really understand what happened'. Sofia's daughter, Maria, takes the narrative in another direction. She argues that a considerable number of villages in the area are plagued by mayi΄a (magic/sorcery) and that many of her friends experienced emotional and physical instability due to someone having cast spells upon them. For example, in the beginning of the 1990s, one of Maria's friends was literally 'melting'(elione) for months. The doctors could not determine the source of the illness. One day her husband found a lock of hair fastened with string in a peculiar fashion in a flower pot at the entrance to their home.[8] He immediately suspected that someone had cast a spell on her(tis ekane ma΄yia) and after approaching a local sorcerer he managed to untie (lino) the spells. 'The husband had broken his promise to marry another woman and she probably wanted to kill his new wife so that she could claim him back' Maria argues.

Broken marriage promises and sexual lust are causal explanations that still prevail as plausible reasons that one resorts to sorcery (Argyrou, 1993). Although there is a lack of in-depth analysis of sorcery in Greece, the trope of the 'looking-glass' (Herzfeld, 1987) indeed highlights Greece's ambivalent positioning vis-a`-vis Europe and its entanglement 'in the temporal dimensions of this homological-heterological discourse' (Panourgia, 1995, p. 85). Scattered ethnographic accounts suggest that sorcery accusations are present in Greek societies regardless of urban or rural contexts (Panourgia, 1995, p. 85).[9] A wide range of activity stretches from deliberate spells and rituals to semi-unintentional evil eye projection. This indicates a complexity in discourse as well as relatedness, the fact that everyone was implicated to such a degree that no one could feel comfortable persecuting others. The role of the Church is also characterised by overt ambivalence as often priests are portrayed as

not ruthlessly condemning such activities, even sometimes celebrating them.[10] It is probably the ambivalence and ambiguity in witchcraft and sorcery discourses that have produced such multiplicity in Giannis's story, akin to the same inter-subjective evaluation of the child's death that proliferated diverse scenarios.

Conclusion: death invites you …

A person can die but once; however, our case studies illustrate that death can be continuously re-enacted, re-created and caught in relations between the living and the dead that unfold in story. This essay is intended as an exercise in epistemology as the interpretation of death is informed by an acknowledged interconnectedness of different spheres of analysis; hard data, emotion, personal dispositions and meaningful relations. The protagonists and the stories that surround their death are exemplary of a two-way process of analysis that can produce multiple effects. By focusing on rhetorical narratives we highlight the mutual benefit of social attitudes to the science of death and scientific insights into understanding social practice.

In the case of the child, knowledge is produced from seeds of hard data and develops towards a multiplicity of counter narratives. For Giannis, knowledge surrounding his death is produced through an extensive array of rhetorical claims that eventually produce 'hard data' pertaining to sorcery and murder. The production of knowledge can begin with the objective fact and move toward subjective claims, or over time a story can acquire hard data-like objectiveness. Actors produce and consume knowledge for themselves and their audiences, beyond the influence of academic 'specialists'. Rhetoric and narrative thus work at all levels to transform historicity.

By sketching this interconnectedness we argue that a narrative approach can multiply our anthropological views on the subject of death. A forensic analysis may not escape interpretation and speculation and personal narratives can indeed produce 'hard data-like' effects. We have argued that the segregation of empirical data from emotive rhetoric does not always occur in the scientific recording of the body. The forensic anthropologist proposes a biological identity, but stops short of giving cultural significance to the corpse. The sociocultural anthropologist can fill that absence by accounting for the creativity found within narrative. Together we can create a biography that is based upon lived and embodied experience, one that links biological narrative with identity and social action.

As Malcolm Smith (Smith, 1996) demonstrates for the seventeenth-century Britain, death invites a story. Death in the domestic sphere had to be endured with patience and acceptance and despite the fact child mortality was high, the separation of emotion and fact was difficult. The parish registers of Hackness, Yorkshire, where deaths, births and marriages were recorded, offer some illuminating entries where John Richardson, the Parish

Clerk, provided a story alongside the registration of death. Accounts of 'good death' were recorded for elderly people whose circumstances were uncomplicated. When the death was unexpected, Richardson 'recorded the circumstances with a scrupulous attention to detail, as if description of the facts would bring about comprehension of the events' (Smith, 1996, p. 3).

Death does not escape the creative orchestration of human ingenuity because death is meaningfully situated in an array of relations between the living and deceased. When the final act of the play is missing, narratives can create absence where there is presence and ignite imagination where there is truth in a meta-language of final scenes.

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Notes [1] In the introduction to the fascinating volume *An Anthropology of Absence* (2010) Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr Sørensen discuss the philosophical and anthropological perspectives on absence. They argue that presence and absence inherently depend on one another for their significance to be truly realised. The power of absence exists in the implication that there is a presence; phenomena impact people's everyday lives precisely because of their absence, what is termed 'the presence of absence' (Bille et al., 2010a, p. 4).

[2] Matthew Engelke has made the distinction between material and immaterial presence when discussing of a Zimbabwean Church. Engelke (2007, p. 252) concludes that 'the problem of presence is a problem of representation'.

[3] Pipyrou interviewed members of the Giannis's family regarding his death during 2004 for the purposes of a project on death in rural Greece. Dorothea at the time was a minor and thus was automatically excluded from the interviews. Among the narratives of death, Pipyrou collected seven cases of suicide. Giannis's narrative has been deliberately chosen for this paper not only because it spans four generations but because over time it has produced data-like effects. The other cases are more contemporary and not tested in time. Dorothea was interviewed in 2012.

[4] Depending on the occasion and the time of the day, the traditional Greek treat (*kerasma*) consists of either coffee with preserved fruit and water, or meat and alcohol, as is the case here. For a detailed description of the traditional *kerasma* see Cowan (1990, pp. 65–67) and Kirtsoglou (2004, pp. 105, 164, 170).

[5] Argyrou (1993) discusses similar cases of marital conflict and separation in terms of magic in Cyprus.

[6] Vernant (1986) notes that representations of death can assume the form of a warrior who has discovered the 'perfect fulfilment of his life in what the Greeks call "a beautiful death"' (1986, p. 54). In Ancient Greek textual representations, feminine figures of death are violent, whilst only males could invite the 'beautiful deaths', a dimension that may be linked to Becker's(1973)classic discussion of heroism and death.

[7] We employ the term witchcraft here to denote unintentional 'magic' such as the evil eye that is believed to happen as a result of people's inherent powers, while we have used the term 'sorcery' to refer to intentional acts of aggressive magic (cf. Blum & Blum, 1965;du Boulay, 1974; Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Herzfeld, 1981; Stewart, 1991). The distinction between sorcery and witchcraft was primarily adopted by Africanist scholars and the opposition of Europeanists to the use of 'Africanist tools' in order to analyse Mediterranean cultural values is well documented (cf. Goddard, Llobera, & Shore, 1994; Herzfeld, 1981). Our adoption of the classic Edward Evans-Pritchard distinction here does not mean to be an uncritical transportation of terms. In central Greece, there is a clear separation between involuntary acts of magic that happen frequently and intentional acts. The term 'magic' (*mayi´a*) is reserved only for the latter cases, while the former are always referred to as simply the 'evil eye'. In the case of Giannis there is a strong focus on potions, hence we employ the term 'sorcery'.

[8] Panourgia (1995, p. 78) notes that bodily parts like hair are mediums of harming other bodies with cancer or insanity that is eventually fatal. Argyrou (1993, p. 261) mentions how hair is regularly perceived as integral to casting spells in Greece.

[9] Charles Stewart (personal communication, February 20, 2012) notes that Greece is different from other areas of Europe which had witch persecutions in the Middle Ages. The fact that witches were never hunted in Greece may mean that they were not so prevalent or dark.

[10] For an excellent analysis of rationality and belief in the supernatural in contemporary Greece see Stewart (1989).

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